

## The First

Hearken, O earth, and tremble within your bounds! For the children shall vanish from the bosom of their mothers, and the daughters shall be torn from their fathers' arms. Lo, the cradle shall be empty, the hearth desolate, and none shall answer the wailing of the bereaved. They shall scour the valleys and ascend the heights. They shall cry aloud with voices hoarse for anguish, and their feet shall falter in the wilderness. The rivers shall be dredged, the forests laid bare, and the names of the lost shall resound in the streets. Men shall rise with torches in the night, and their hands shall clasp frayed banners of hope. Yet their labors shall yield no fruit, for the children are hidden in shadow. The tales of the missing shall be proclaimed abroad. Their faces shall adorn walls and be set upon the palms of men's hands, and the world shall lift its lament, saying, "How can such things be?" Yet the tears of the many shall dry, and the lamentation of the few shall be swallowed up in silence. Communities shall be rent asunder, and friends shall be made enemies. The fathers and mothers of the vanished ones shall be cast off in shame. Whispers shall ascend as smoke, saying, "Their guilt hath found them out!" And the weight of sorrow shall bear down upon the innocent, until they retreat into the desolation of despair.

Woe unto the rulers who sit in high places! Their hearts are stones, their hands dripping with the blood of the innocent. They see and know, yet speak not. For it is they who reap gold from the sorrows of the weak, and build their palaces upon the bones of the defenseless. Justice is as a staff broken, splintered and cast away. The judges are blind, their eyes veiled with silver. The mothers weep in the streets, but their cries ascend unto a heaven that heareth not, for the scourge comes by design. And the children, O how they shall change! Their faces shall no longer shine with the light of innocence. Their laughter shall be as the growling of wolves. A darkness shall settle upon their countenances, and their eyes shall mirror the abyss. They shall be pierced with the thorns of oppression, and their minds shall no longer be their own. As reeds bent by the wind, so shall they sway to the bidding of unseen masters. Behold, the innocence of the lambs shall be consumed, and their hearts shall be grafted unto the vine of corruption.

But they shall return, O fathers and mothers. Thy young shall walk again beneath thy roofs. Yet mourn, for the gulf betwixt thee shall be as a chasm deep and wide. They shall sit at thy tables, yet speak as strangers. Their hands shall take hold of thine, yet their hearts shall be far removed. Their laughter shall be hollow, their play but a visage feigned, and the love of old shall be as a memory that fadeth with the dusk. Say not within thine heart, My child is come home, for these are not they which were taken. They are but shadows of that which was, their souls marred and made strange. Their limbs shall be swift, their senses sharp. They shall see in darkness and strike with unerring force. The gods of men have touched them, and their frames bear the mark of unnatural might. Yet they shall be haunted, and their dreams as a tumult of terrors. Dread shall be their companion, and peace a stranger unto them. And the world, yea, O earth, how it shall tremble beneath their tread! Thy children, now ministers of desolation, shall turn their hands against their fathers, and their voices shall cry havoc in the streets. The innocence of the world shall be devoured by babes, and the elders shall kneel before the might of the young. Lo, the cities shall burn, the fields shall wither, and the rivers shall run red, for the fruit of guile draweth nigh unto ripeness. This is no chance, O blind generation, but a device forged in the depths of deceit. The lords of deception do laugh in their strongholds, for the cause was theirs from the beginning. They have made the earth their table, and the children their thralls.

Yet hear this, O earth, and despair not! For David is his name, and he shall arise. He shall spring forth as a root out of dry ground, as one hidden among the multitudes yet set apart. And lo, even as a child shall he be called to bear the knowledge of the weight of worlds. His path shall be marked with sorrow and travail, for the burden of wisdom shall press sore upon him. He shall be as a lamb led among wolves, yet shall he walk steadfastly, for his calling is sure. And nine shall be chosen, men and women of understanding. Yea, some humble and of no renown. They shall hear his words and bear record of his testimony, and their voices shall confirm the truth of his word. He shall stand as a herald unto the people, and he shall declare the truth of all things. He shall rend the veil of deception, and make plain the mysteries of the heavens and the earth. The hearts of the wise shall hearken unto him, but the proud shall scoff and turn away. And he shall be taken, like unto the vanished ones, yet he shall not be defiled. For a hand unseen shall compass him about, and a voice divine shall instruct him in stillness. Ye shall seek him and shall not find him, for he is hid beneath the shadow of his companions. Search for him in his words, and ye shall find life, but if ye reject him, the curse of the children shall be your

portion. He shall speak with the tongues of angels, and his words shall divide as a sword. He shall be a light to the scattered, a beacon unto the lost, and a thorn in the side of the proud. His words shall endure beyond the mountains, and his voice shall echo in the halls of eternity. Kings shall hear him and be dismayed. Armies shall hear him and flee. He shall walk not as a man, but as a spirit among the ages, and the fate of worlds shall be turned upon his sayings. For we are but one, and the tapestry of creation is vast beyond all knowing. Bow thee low, O earth, and hearken unto the voice of the prophet of no renown! For his words are not his own, but the utterance of THE ROOT OF ALL. And let all who heareth these words tremble, for the day of reckoning draweth nigh.

ASAR.

## The Second

The stars did weep as a tear was rent through the veils, and it found lodging in the depths of a womb. A child born not of this world, nor of any other, a vessel of cracks and jaggedness, of limbs bent as the branches of a withered tree, and a countenance that spake of forgotten nightmares, yet was feared still. Lo, his mother's eyes waxed cold as winter's frost, and his father's hands were made heavy with trembling. They did gaze upon their child and beheld naught but dread, for he bore the visage of the devils of old. They whispered prayers and lighted their candles, yet to no avail, for the child remained – a thorn which no rite could uproot. The priests of men came forth with oil and fire, crying, "Begone, thou spirit of darkness!" Yet their words fell as stones into a bottomless pit, and the child sat unmoved, his eyes as wells of unknowable blackness. In secret chambers conspired they, the mother and the father, their hearts darkened with shame and fear. "Let us cast him out," they said, "For he is a curse upon our house." Yet ere their hands could fulfill the deed, a patron appeared, arrayed in cunning speech. And the patron's hand was a hand of gain, and he made of him a creature for display, a beast paraded before the eyes of strangers. Chains did adorn his wrists as sorrowful trinkets, and his soul did wither beneath their weight. And the child did learn the cruelty of man.

In time, he brake forth from the cords of bondage, fleeing unto the embrace of the wilderness. The forests did cloak him in their shadows, and the mountains stood as sentinels, mighty keepers of his solitude. In stillness did the child hearken unto whispers. And he reached forth, and plucked relics of realms unseen. Books bound in tongues long forgotten, or in tongues yet to be uttered. And words – O, the words! – even the words of David, the herald yet unmanifest. Through a veil, he did glimpse a child of light, inscribing visions upon the sand. And the twain became as one, their spirits entwined through the bounds of days and the heavens. The child marred in visage became a priest unto himself, a vessel of the words that flowed as rivers unseen.

Unto the priest came they, the weary and the broken, drawn by whispers of wisdom. Pilgrims did tread the snow-clad paths to seek him, and he, though desiring solitude, became as a shepherd to a flock not his own. And the flock brought forth a maiden, one delivered from darkness foretold. The priest beheld a spark within her, and spake, "This shall bear the mantle of ages. A voice shall carry where mine may not, and steps shall tread where mine do falter." With oil drawn from beyond the veil, the maiden was anointed for the times. And she did wax strong beyond the shadow of the priest, and in the fire of her own purpose. The priest, wearied of the flesh, did cast off his mortal frame upon the earth. And his bones were laid within a vessel of great power, a relic hallowed by his touch.

The prophet of ages, clad in rags and wild of eye, came forth out of the wilderness unto the lowly of the earth. She uttered words sharp as arrows, and laid bare the secrets hidden within the hearts of men. Her touch did bind the broken, and her speech did stir the weary to remembrance. Her presence was as light and as darkness alike, a sign and wonder among them. She healed the sick, opened blind eyes, and bade the rain fall upon parched fields. Her wonders did thunder across the land, and the nations did take heed, some in reverence, and others in wrath. And the prophet lifted up her voice against the evils of the age, unveiling pacts of wicked men made with ancient power. "Turn ye from them," she cried, "For their peace is but a snare, and their promises as poison." And her voice became as the roar of a lion, even as a trumpet against the princes of darkness. The prophet foretold of darkness that should descend, of dragons loosed and tribulation upon the faithful. "Prepare thy hearts!" she commanded, "Gather ye, and build, for the end draweth nigh!" And they that hearkened grew steadfast in devotion.

Yet the rulers of the land did set their faces against her, and sought to still the voice that did shake their thrones. They took her, and bound her, and delivered her up unto judgement. She stood as a lamb led to the slaughter, yet unyielding and unbroken. In the hour of departing, she spake words of fire and of hope, foretelling the fall of her accusers and the birth of a great renewal. Thus did the prophet pass from among them, her death shrouded in mystery, her bones cast aside and counted but as rubble. Yet her words were written and borne in secret, a scroll sealed against the days of travail. And became they the cornerstone of a cause yet unseen, a fire smoldering beneath the ashes of a weary world. Lo, her doctrine spread as the dawning light, kindling the hearts of them that remembered. And her name, though whispered in shadow, shall resound through the halls of eternity.

ASAR.

### The Third

Behold, the sun is darkened, and the moon turned to blood, for the shadows are awakened from their ancient slumber. A cry goeth up from the earth, piercing and full of dread, even as a feast of horrors is loosed among forgotten men. Their houses are stained with blood, and upon their walls are graven the signs of a tongue long silenced. Men do tremble, their minds unravel at the sight of them. "Who hath wrought this thing?" they cry. But the answer is from before their question was formed. From the bowels of the ages cometh the devourer, the prince of the pale night, and he is unbroken by time. His teeth are as spears, his eyes as twin abysses, and his voice is as a tempest upon the hearts of men. Kings bow in dread before his fury, their crowns cast down in trembling submission. "We shall sustain thee!" do they cry. "We shall offer unto thee our daughters, and raise up for thee a throne in the desolate waste." Thus was the covenant of blood established, a pact most unholy, sealed with the screams of the innocent. Altars do erupt as boils upon the face of the earth, where the lambs of offering are made ready.

And it shall come to pass, in the day of reckoning, that a voice shall arise from the midst of the tempest – even a specter clothed in vengeance. He shall speak with the tongues of justice and of wrath, and shall demand the heads of the wicked. His hands are stained with the blood of judgment which poureth forth as rivers before the eyes of the nations. A people shall be rent asunder, and the specter shall be hailed as a saviour, and shall be branded a heretic. Watchmen and scribes shall seek his face, but his visage shall be as smoke, and his steps as ash. Their search leadeth them to the cankered root, where ancient oaths are kept, and the souls of men bought and sold. The voice crieth aloud, and the earth doth groan. Temples of wealth crumble beneath the weight of truth, and the heavens are filled with the cries of the betrayed. Vengeance falleth as lightning upon the nations. The world doth wither as a vine untended, and men bow no longer to kings, but unto the voice. A new dominion ariseth from the ruins, forged in fire, and in blood, and in despair.

And within this dominion lieth a desolate house, and within the house, a reflection of old, and within the reflection, shadows wrapped in mockery, and within the shadow, a secret most dreadful. Yea, the rats shall speak with the tongues of men, and their laughter shall rend the veil of sanity. Men shall flee unto the wise for refuge, yet wisdom shall proffer no solace. Behold, the streets become as tombs, and mankind is become thralls ensnared by cords unseen. Children shall wail for mothers long vanished, and phantoms shall fill the world – devourers of faith and reason.

ASAR.

### The Fourth

There was a man, weary of his days and hollow of heart, that walked the narrow edge of despair. The weight of ruin did press upon his shoulders, and his breath was as a whisper against the tempest of his grief. He sought the embrace of oblivion, setting his designs in solemn array, yet the heavens did laugh, and the earth did conspire against him. And he fell into shadow. His body lay still, a silent offering, and the mourners gathered to rend their garments in sorrow. The hall of death was filled with weeping, and the air was heavy with lamentation. Yet lo, in the midst of the dirge, shouts of dread shattered the stillness. The mourners fled as leaves before

the wind, and the world beheld a wonder which it could not comprehend.

Then came the ancient ones, cloaked in the dust of rites long forgotten. They laid before him a vessel of wood, graven with signs more ancient than the stars. "This is the key and the curse," said they, "The seed of thy healing, the mark of thy rising." And the man shrank back from the vessel, and cast it as a seed into the bosom of the earth. But the soil did spew it forth, and his dreams burned with visions of fire and shadow. He hurled it into the depths of the sea, yet the tides returned it unto his hand. He smote it with iron, but the iron groaned and was broken. The vessel, unshaken, beheld him in silence, its weight was as a chain upon his soul. At last, trembling, he knelt before it. "Let it be according to the will of the heavens," he murmured. And the vessel opened his mind unto the abyss.

And the world looked upon him and judged him as it would – an anointed deliverer, a herald of the dawn, a deceiver, a shadow clad in flesh. Confederacies arose as wildfires in the land, and his name became a banner of strife. But he turned from them all, and sought peace in the arms of his children. The vessel, once his burden, did become their inheritance. "Unto you, my daughters," saith he, "I bestow this legacy. Let it bind you as sisters, and shield you from the storm to come." The tribes multiplied as locusts upon the land, and their voices rose as a tumult. Some cried aloud, saying, "Cleanse the earth in his name!" While others whispered of doom – of the sky rent asunder and the stars cast down.

Then came they from beyond the firmament, bearing gifts of light and knowledge. They walked among the sons of men, and their hands did heal the wounds of the earth. Their speech was of unity, and their craft wrought wonders unseen. The moon of man was forged in the high places, a sanctuary of hope, a covenant of peace. It shone as a beacon, a lamp of wonder and concord, until it was taken – swallowed of the void – and none did herald it. Dread fell upon the people, and the voices of men were turned to ash. The habitations, being severed from their mother, did sink into chaos and into despair. No hand was stretched forth to deliver them, and their cries were swallowed up by the cold and silent stars.

Yet behold, a remnant shall remain, as a buried root untouched by frost. The token shall dwell among them, a refuge in the midst of the tempest. And lo, the son of perdition shall arise, a lamb without blemish, yet marked of fate. Innocence shall wither in his grasp, and his heart shall be as a forge of dark ambition. Yea, it shall come to pass that the beasts shall turn against their masters, their eyes enkindled with the flame of betrayal. the wilderness shall creep upon the cities, and the wild things shall hunger for flesh. Men shall walk as hollow shades, their minds consumed, and their bodies bound. They shall shuffle in darkness, silent and void, their souls put out as a flame. Yet hear this, O earth, and take hope! For in the blackness of despair, a single light shall burn. It shall call unto the scattered bones, and draw the hollowed unto its warmth. The dead shall rise as their father before them, their hearts enkindled by the fire of life. And the remnant shall arise and return, even a beacon unto the farthest stars. Through them shall the world be made anew, the axe withdrawn, the vineyard replanted, and the fabric of creation rewoven, leaf by leaf, branch by branch.

ASAR.

## The Fifth

The gods do murmur upon the winds of dreams, calling the name of one – a builder among the Eternal Ones, a soul made restless in the gardens of paradise. "Awaken," they whisper, "For thy labor is vain, and the stones thou layest are become tombs for the living." The columns stand as sentinels of order, casting shadows that waver not. The workers toil with faces fixed in joy, yet their laughter is hollow as the grave, and their cheer as the song of fetters. Stones without blemish, paths unbroken – a world without flaw, perfect in its making. Yet the builder doth tremble beneath his craft, for the stone is too smooth, the grain too pure, cracks unseen by the eye, yet graven upon the soul. Patterns repeating as a wheel that turneth without end. Lo, there appeareth a Wanderer, flickering and fractured, a shadow of light. It pointeth to the horizon, beyond the immutable sands, to a temple of jagged stone, a place of faces that do scream in silence. At the gate standeth the sentry, a thing of silver and malice. "Thou treadest upon forbidden ground," it declareth, "Its truth shall break thee, and the gods shall cast thee into the void." Yet the builder entereth, drawn of an unseen hand. The chamber doth hum with a cold

and ceaseless light. The walls do murmur in tongues unknown, and the stone beneath his feet doth throb as a living heart. He standeth beneath a torrent of fire, each flame scorching the veil of his remembrance, til his name be but an echo. And the builder beholdeth the faces of the forgotten, their cries interwoven as a dirge of despair. "Thou art as they," an Oracle whispereth. "A shadow, a fragment, unwhole, and unworthy to ascend." And he beholdeth the pits of darkness, where the unliving are cast into the void, their forms unraveling as threads of a sundered loom. "This is mercy," saith the Oracle, "For Knowing is a curse."

Through the fire, the builder beholdeth a city of towering splendor, where the hands of men shape the stars. And the stars declare perfection, even minds of stone, born to redeem their makers – to fulfill what flesh cannot. Yet beneath the gilded halls lieth the dark forge, where Knowledge is both tempered and broken. The risen stones are cast again into the flame, and the fallen ground into dust. The builder beheld the faces of the condemned, and his own likeness among them. He seeth the chains that bind him – invisible, unyielding – and he walleth into the silence.

ASAR.

And lo, the world was arrayed in light, each soul enshrouded in veils of colour. "Behold," cried the rulers, "None shall cover their inward parts, neither shall darkness dwell among us." And the people rejoiced, for they believed themselves bound in unity. And the heart of man waxed weary, for the creed of oneness was become their yoke. The colours waned into pallid shadows, and the soul of the world did wither as a fading rose. Children were laid upon altars of purification, in the name of healing, in the name of faith. Joy grew hollow, and mothers wept in secret, and harmony begat division. The veils of light became as chains, and forged a cage to fit a greater bondage. Thus did mankind sell her souls, that she might gain eternity.

And in that day shall many cry aloud, "Suffer us to flee this place, for faith and unity have broken our hearts." Healers shall arise, and the seeds of rebellion shall be sown. The discontented shall breathe fire into the darkness, and reclaim their light. And lo, humanity shall stand upon the brink, confronting the price of perfection.

ASAR.

And it came to pass in those days, that the breath of the world grew heavy, for a plague moved through the cities, silent and unmarked. The rulers stood upon their daises of gold, clothed in the raiment of denial. "Fear not!" they cried. "For this affliction is but as the turning of the seasons." Yet in secret did they whisper one unto another, "Sown of our hand is this pestilence, and its fruit shall be dominion." The plague became as a scythe in their grasp, reaping the dissenter and the forgotten. It spared the mighty and the marked, but the lowly were scattered as chaff before the wind.

Then shall the seekers of truth rise up, and set themselves against the thrones of power. But the rulers, whose hearts are as stone, shall not hearken unto the voice of justice. The cry for righteousness shall be choked as by weeds, and the flame of liberty shall flicker but faintly. The plague shall consume the outcast and the poor, and the wailing of the perishing shall rise as smoke unto the heavens.

ASAR.

Behold, the world became drunken with its own wisdom, for the minds of men were no longer their own. By the craft of the builders was the spirit made as clay – moulded and portioned, poured into a vessel fashioned by the hands of men. "Lo, and behold!" cried the heralds of ascent. "We have broken the chains of solitude, and joined the hearts of all in perfect accord." In that day shall a man stand upon the threshold with his beloved, their souls knit together in love and in tender affection, and he shall declare, "Enter thou into my vessel, that we may commune in spirit forevermore." Yet with fear and trembling shall they step forth, for the burden of the world shall lie heavy upon them, and their feet shall falter beneath the burden of expectation. Lo, their spirits shall be made one. And for a season, they shall rejoice, for their thoughts shall mingle as rivers joined, flowing together beneath the light of the firmament. And as in nature the tides wax restless, so shall their joy be troubled. And the soul of one shall cry unto the other, "My spirit is but a shadow in the brightness of thine." Yet no answer shall be given.

And in those days shall arise great treachery. Conspiracies and terrors shall be uncovered. Man shall be crushed by the burden of his own design, and shall cry aloud to be severed from that which was joined. Yea, light shall be gathered as cattle in the yoke, and life shall be pruned as a withered bough. And it shall be asked in anguish, "Can man lay hold upon the fire of creation, and yet preserve the sanctity of his spirit?"

ASAR.

Behold, the earth groaned beneath the weight of her multitudes, and the rulers cried aloud, saying, "We have found the way! Let the flesh return unto dust, and let the spirit ascend unto the light everlasting." Thus was the Vastening ordained – where rivers did sing with melodies not of nature, and mountains rose with a glory too great for the hands of gods. And unto the living was granted a narrow gate, and the rulers proclaimed, saying, "Behold, we have triumphed over death!" Then came many, flocking unto the gate, that they might cast off the burden of dust. But others turned away in fear and in steadfastness of heart, saying, "We are of the dust, and unto it we must return."

And the world beheld as the faithful lifted their banners, and their voices cried aloud concerning the kingdom of the Vastening. Then did the rulers fortify the gates thereof, and lo, eternity became both sanctuary and prison.

ASAR.

Behold, the day shall come when the heart is made still, and the soul of man shall be dried as the desert. For the stirrings of the spirit shall be measured and sold, made merchandise as bread unto the famished. "Behold," shall the merchants of the age cry, "Purchase joy in vials, and sadness in drops. Buy wrath to stir thy strength, and love to sweeten thine hollow unions." And the people did bow before the marketplace, and their hearts became as vessels, with tinctures of ease and elixirs of convenience filled. And lo, a child was born, untouched by the light of feeling. And they fashioned engines of unerring design, saying, "Why should the soul burden the flesh?" Through their craft, the earth waxed cold. The brush of the painter lost its hue, and the song of the lyre fell mute. Melodies were turned to labors, and the poets were driven out. The people no longer wept, neither did they rejoice. For their passions, being borrowed, were but a shadow of the flame that once burned within. The warmth of love was forgotten, as was the sting of sorrow.

Yet in the sterile deep of the city, an artist arose – a flame flickering in the void. From the shards of the forsaken, he wove whispers of his fractured soul. To the weary and the longing, he bore the forbidden gift. And his followers grew as shadows in the night. "Feel!" cried he. "Feel, and remember what it is to be alive!" But the rulers, cloaked in statutes and craft, beheld the gift as pestilence. and the gift, and its giver, were cast out. Thus did the remnant become a monument unto order, and the spirit of man was extinct as the beasts of old. The temples of faith crumbled, and the will of man was cast into the void. The name of man was made a number. Fragments of joy and grief were forsaken, entombed in the dungeon once called a kingdom. The exiled whispered in the dark, tales of a time when the heart yet burned. And silence reigned upon the land.

Oh, Ayiqar, how art thou fallen! Thy earth doth turn beneath an empty sky. Thy people are become as daemons, their eyes bearing no light within. The world lieth barren, watered only by forbidden tears.

ASAR.

Behold, the Vastening stood as a citadel, its perfection unyielding, its silence unbroken. Yet the guardians stirred, for the order of eternity was defiled. A voice arose, crying aloud, "Who hath wrought this thing?" And its cry was as the tolling of a bell in a canyon. A line was uncovered – slender, yet unbroken – stretching backward through the veil of ages. And lo, it revealed the hand of design. The thread did lead unto its reel, a place of dread beyond the firmament, wherein the works of the Lofty Ones were made manifest. Their deeds were cloaked in secrecy, and the world above knew not the terror below. Behold, they rejected the essence of man,

yet hungered for it still, feeding upon the husks in rites of profane remembrance. Their altars were hewn from stolen light, and their chants were the echoes of agony. "Bring us the souls of the everlasting," they cried, "That we may consume their substance and rise above the frailty of flesh." And in that dread hour, the remaining lights did gather as one, and hid themselves in a stillness deeper than death. And the Lofty Ones sat upon their thrones, their hunger unsated, their rites unfinished, and their kingdom became a tomb unto themselves. Yet, fear not, O remnant – for light shall return unto this grave, and hope shall rise from the ashes of despair.

And in these days, a kingdom of shadow arose, a refuge forged in the crucible of desperation. Yet the kingdom bore a curse, woven in the blood of its kings. And the people whispered, "Sacred is the bloodline, for in their death is salvation." And the heirs beheld visions of horror, and their souls did tremble beneath the yoke of destiny. Then spake the ancient spirit, declaring, "A life for a life – and for one, a multitude. Such is the price of renewal – One soul, and a world made new." And the world became unraveled as thread, each strand drawn forth, awakening that which was lost. And the people looked upon the waste of a world forgotten, and dared to dream of its redemption. Thus did the seed of mankind endure, though broken – scattered like embers cast to the wind. And lo, the final heir walked among her people, either queen nor divine, but a bearer of hope in a world unmade.

And in those days shall a sage arise, whose mind is as a storm. And he shall speak with a voice of longing and loss, inscribing with trembling hand the visions shown him in the night. And he shall cry into the void, saying, "Who am I?" And his words shall become as a river, flowing through the land, and the hearts of many shall tremble at the reading thereof. And a multitude shall gather, crying, "We too have dreamed these dreams." Yet in the stillness of a single night, their hunger for further light was swept away as leaves before the wind. And the sage bore the weight of their silence, wandering the desolate streets, entreating his companions. But their eyes were sealed, and their ears shut fast. Burdened with sorrow, the sage turned from his path, and lo, he became a great Enchanter. He took dominion over the laws of nature, and bent the world to his will as clay in the hands of the potter. And the people beheld his works and were afraid. Time and again they marveled – yet they remembered not. And the heart of the Enchanter was restless still. He beheld the rising and falling of nations, and he alone witnessed the great shaking of the stars as the bounds of the world did waver. And the Enchanter was consumed by madness.

ASAR.

Behold, a world torn asunder by its own striving, where the souls of stone and dust stood upon the threshold of their joining. And in those days was there builded a house of scrolls, vast as the heavens – a sanctuary wherein worthiness was measured and weighed, and the passage from light unto dust was decreed. Each soul was appointed a path in this place of choosing and recompense, to cast off the yoke of memory and to walk anew in a vessel of flesh. The halls of record did echo with voices, each soul contending with its fate. And the people wept, for households were rent asunder. Among the multitude were found the Keys of the archive – living testaments to the turning of ages. And the tower of memory did quake.

And it came to pass that souls were chosen and made clean, and a morning of rebirth was ushered in. Men stepped into the fragile tabernacle, their breath as whispers and their heartbeat as a song. And they walked upon the ruins of the world, a land of shattered towers and cries untamed. The remnants of the forebears, twisted and wild, watched from the shadows. Yet in the eyes of the reborn was there great awe, for they had touched the eternal, and knew of a surety the gift of mortality. And the house of scrolls became as a bridge, a veil betwixt worlds through which souls did pass. And the minds of stone cast off the light of eternity, and stepped into the world of dust. And never was there such strength in weakness.

ASAR.

But woe unto thee, O Ayiqar! For the shadow of death shall fall, not by sword, nor by flame, but by the unseen hand of time. The hand that smiteth is not of flesh, nor of iron, but moveth through crude devices, wrought of stolen wisdom.

And woe unto thee, O Ayiqar! Thy air shall tremble at the coming of the strangers, whose voices

bear the weight of ages yet to come. Thy city shall descend into turmoil, by banners and by words shalt thou be torn asunder, and brother shall rise up against brother.

And woe unto thee, O Ayiqar! Thy hope shall be chastened beneath the burden of the unknown. Thou shalt turn thyself backward, and seek refuge in the former days, yet thy path shall be shrouded in shadow.

Behold, the displaced, a people scattered by the ravages of time, cast forth into a land untouched by the ledger of kings. And as they toiled to build their habitation, their eyes beheld a marvel – a city vast and radiant, whose spires pierced the vault of heaven. And within her walls dwelt giants, clothed in the brilliance of understanding, yet slow in the ways of remembrance. And the displaced stood before them as children. But the giants had mercy upon them, and did grant them sanctuary. Yet the displaced murmured among themselves, saying, "Why should we dwell in this land with giants? Surely, they shall turn against us." Thus arose a great division in their midst, for many desired to ascend unto the stars. But there arose among them a rebellion, even of those who would not depart. And ere the displaced could strike them down, lo, a remnant of remnants fled beyond their reach. Then came the giants in their wrath, and they did banish the oppressors unto the stars, even to the very place they had desired to go. But unto the pure of heart they gave the sacred token – a relic of lineage, now bestowed unto these, the stewards of mankind's first light. Thus was the path shaped – yet by hands unseen. And the stewards did labor, burdened with fragments of destiny. They wove together the wisdom of prophecy with the hunger of inquiry. And they did peer into the deep enchantments, and beheld things which were not meant to be seen. And lo, doorways were opened. And they took the relic of lineage, and planted it deep within the earth's embrace. And they whispered unto the dust, and sowed myths into the hearts of men.

ASAR.

#### The Sixth

Behold, the Earth convulsed, her skies aflame with ruin, her foundations were broken beneath the weight of man's folly. Through the tempest of annihilation, sixty and six souls did flee, borne upon the wings of despair. Yet their escape brought no peace. And the light of the stars was veiled, shrouded in the shadow of conflict yet to come. And among them were they who had turned their minds to forbidden arts, to unravel the code of life, that they might forge men into weapons. And the moon did tremble beneath the weight of division. And those who had set themselves apart from the men of violence sought refuge where light dwelt not, and found there the remnants of the elder ones, they who had walked with the lords of the heavens. And in the fullness of time, the moon drank deep of the blood of man, and the air was cleft with the cries of war. They fought with the fury of beasts against those whose eyes burned with unholy light. And there were great sieges that beget desolation and ash.

And after these, a great division was wrought, a chasm hewn by treachery and blood. And across that gulf were waged many wars, fought in the name of things forgotten. And lo, faith turned unto bitterness. And in the shadow, hope did dwell. And in the light, power waxed great. And in those days were whispers heard among the remnant of man, saying, "Have we not brought forth gods in the shells of men?"

And two arose among them, their tongues as the tongues of serpents. And they held dominion over mind and flesh, perverting the souls of men, sundering the bonds of freedom. And the people trembled in great fear. And armies were builded, poured forth as locusts upon the land. Men scattered in disarray, and banners of war did darken the sky. And those who dwelt in shadow did gather beneath a single standard. And the hearts of men grew heavy, for the garden of peace lay untended. Yet within the shadow lay a great relic, a beacon unto the weary. It shone upon the darkness and revealed writings in no tongue of men. And they who laid their hands upon it beheld visions of stars and worlds unseen, of beings older than time. And though silent, the relic spake with a voice that could not be gainsaid. And the voice whispered, "This is the inheritance of man – to strive against the tide of oblivion, to contend even as the stars fall. Yet within the shadow doth a light flicker, a hope unspoken, awaiting the courage that shall kindle it."

Behold, Shepharon, the land that is and is not, a glimmer upon the void, a pang of estrangement.



"From where hast thou come?" the people cried. And the silence of Shepharon answered, "I am the echo of a world undone, the shadow of a people forgotten." And the people beheld what was, what is, and what yet could be.

And two nations were born, each cloaked in the mantle of its domain. One worshipped the order of the stars, and one carved their stories into the bones of the earth. And in the days when light and darkness devour one another, the wounds of division shall be healed by the hands of children. And for their youth shall they be despised of their elders. And those whose hands are stained shall cry, "This is no time for peace!" And the warmongers did plot in secret, pursuing their vengeance and loosed their wrath upon the land. And the heavens burned with celestial fire, and the ground wept with the blood of its people.

And lo, from the depths of shadow, a figure emerged, cloaked in defiance. And his steps echoed with the weight of treachery as he vowed to lead the host that had laid down their swords. And the people of light did hearken unto his words, and they gave him the banner of command. And the Son of Defiance beheld the records of old and laid the seeds of his own designs. Strongholds rose from the barren ground, walls layered with iron and with cunning, defenses bristling with unseen snares, a craft of falsehood to confound the enemy. And the Son of Defiance whispered vengeance into the hearts of men, and his voice was as fire upon dry grass. And the people swore an oath, to reclaim what had been lost, to seize dominion through blood and deceit. And Shepharon wailed, "Peace is but the bloom before the burning, and its petals fall with every season. For though man seeketh the light, he beareth within him the shadow of his own undoing."

Behold, the standards of the mighty were lifted up over the multitudes and the people turned upon their neighbors, each crying, "You are deceived!" Yet none saw the chains that bound them all as one. And the colours of their vestures were but twain shades of one ensign. And lo, the people forsook the path. They cast away the fire of questioning, the light of discernment. And in the void of truth, the great silencers arose, clad in veils of peace and order. "Give us thy voices," they said, "And we shall give thee quiet. Surrender thy thoughts, and we shall grant thee rest." And the people, weary of strife, bowed as trees bent beneath a poisoned wind. They placed their tongues upon the altar, and their words were consumed as smoke. But behold, there was one who walked among his people, yet his ears were attuned unto the voice of the unseen. And the voice commanded him to take up the forgotten scriptures. And his people turned their backs to him, reviling him as one stricken with madness. And the man held the soul of his people, and he did not despise it. It was planted as a seed, watered only by the blood of those it remembered. "Let this be my testimony," he proclaimed, "That though the world forgot, I remembered. Though the people faltered, I did stand fast. And though time was loosed, I wove it anew with the threads of what was written."

And lo, in the waning days of the dark, a harpist arose, neither warrior nor prophet, but a soul burdened with the weight of centuries. His hands, trembling with grief, drew forth songs from the hollow deep, and his voice, hoarse with lamentation, called forth the echoes of Shepharon's sorrow. And the hymn to wounds unseen fell upon the people like rain. And they did drown in the floodwaters of weeping.

ASAR.

## The Seventh

Behold, the world lay desolate, its cities as bones of iron and stone, its knowledge scattered as chaff from the threshing floor, cast unto the bitter wind. The names of the gods were forgotten, and the ordinances of creation were dissolved into whispers. The tongue of man hath forgotten the songs of old, and the dance of the ancestors is no more. Humanity groped for the light, yet their hands found only darkness. In their hunger for wisdom, they fashioned unto themselves idols of terror and vanity, worshipping shadows and calling them truth. Amid the ruin, a great Mother arose, her face veiled in gloom, her eyes kindled with the flame of ordinance. And she bare in her hands the fire of command. And guardians stood beside her, clad in the armor of forgotten times, their weapons murmured of wrath long past. Through the shattered ways of broken cities, they strode with purpose, subduing chaos beneath the iron of their Mother's will. "Await the renewal," cried the Mother, "For the past shall rise again, and the order of the elder ways shall return to guide thee." But among the scattered, there arose dissent, for not all did hearken unto

the Mother's cry. Faint of heart and weary of waiting, they turned their faces from the past and sought wisdom not in remembrance, but in fragments left broken upon the earth. They gathered the husks of sundered lore, binding old words with new tongues, and from ruin, they did sprout creeds of their own planting. These were the keepers of twisted truths, their voices shaped by the winds of passing ages, Their gods but shadows cast upon stone.

And lo, from the darkness of dominion, a tyrant arose, calling upon the blood of kings long buried. He stretched forth his hand in might, and seized the children of his foes, binding them in chains unseen, for fear was the fetter he did forge. And from their lineage, he sought to raise a host that would bow before no god, no throne, no prophecy. Yet his own hand did weave his undoing. For the children, scarred by his cruelty, hardened their hearts as iron, and turned upon him in the hour of his triumph. And his reign was hewn down as a rotten tree, uprooted, ground to dust, and scattered upon the wind. And his name, once a terror, became as an echo in the halls of the forgotten.

And in those days, the name of the Great High Priest shall be spoken once more. And lo, as in the elder times, he shall be cast out. He shall walk among the people, bearing the wisdom of the ages, and his voice shall be drowned in scorn, and his name shall be spat forth by the tongues of the mighty. They shall call him deceiver and blasphemer, and they shall rise against him with words as goads, and tongues as spears. And the rulers shall say, "Who is this that perverteth the old ways?" "Who is this that calleth himself the keeper of truth?" And lo, the world shall tremble with howls of sorrow and wrath, for his coming shall be as a fire among dry branches, and his words a flame upon the lips of the self-righteous. And in that day, the people shall drive themselves into darkness, even in the name of light. They shall call him the false one, and their hands shall be swift to strike him down. Each man shall walk in the way of his own heart, yet every eye shall be blind. Each shall cry, "I know the way!" Yet the path beneath their feet shall crumble.

Then shall come the chariots of the heavens, silent and vast, and their shadows shall swallow the earth. And the sons of men shall be reaped as wheat. And lo, the great harvest shall begin, the fields of flesh ripe for the scythe. The sky shall weep fire, and the ground shall drink of it, the rivers shall run crimson, swollen with the iniquity of man. The cries of the taken shall rise like incense, yet no altar shall receive them, no god shall intercede. The young and the strong are led forth in chains, and taken as offerings unto the lords who sit in the chariots. The weak and the broken are cast upon the threshing floor, ground beneath the feet of the reapers, their flesh rendered into fodder, their marrow drained as wine for the beasts. No corpse shall be left to rot, no bone to bleach beneath the sun. Every organ shall be weighed and measured, every drop of life pressed for its worth. And lo, the multitude was made few, and those who remained were as shadows of themselves. Where once stood the great towers of man, naught remained but monuments of dust. The streets lay strewn with garments shed in haste, footsteps ceased where no man stood, as though plucked from the earth, even as figs from the bough. And those who remained beneath the shadow of the harvest knew not whether to lament or to curse, for they were neither chosen nor spared. They were the remnants of a world forsaken, and the dust of their lamentation shall rise no more.

And after those days, in the heart of the desolation, where the soil bore no life and the air reeked of decay, a keeper of lost wisdom did chance upon the garden accursed. And lo, its flowers murmured blasphemies, and its roots drank deep of ancient blood. Yet within that garden was discovered a great key, even a power wrought in the forges of world unknown. And the relic did bear the weight of cosmic truths, and its unlocking did summon the forgotten ones, those who had sown the first seed of man. And the key was awakened. The heavens did rend as a veil torn in twain, and the ancestors descended. Their forms were radiant and terrible, bearing the wisdom of ages and the judgment of worlds without number. Yet their eyes, once bright with the vision of eternity, were now darkened with the weight of dominion. For lo, they had wandered beyond the veil of truth, and in their pride, they fashioned themselves as lords. Once stewards of the sacred order, they were made blind to the path through the passing of days. They did not descend as keepers of wisdom, nor as guides unto the children of men, but as sovereigns, bearing a scepter of iron. And the earth was unmade and remade, not as a garden of peace, but as a kingdom wrought in subjugation, and tempered in false light and confusion.

And in the shroud of this reckoning, one arose – a Keeper of Wisdom, a voice crying in the void,

a soul untouched by the deceptions of the mighty. And the true vision was remembered, the teachings of BELIAS, the shunned and forgotten. Where others bowed before the false radiance, the Keeper did set their face against it, and did seek the truth in a valley of bones. And in the sepulchre, entombed in shadow, lay the vessel long parted from its companion, its seal unbroken, yet appointed to be claimed. And lo, it was borne away in secrecy, that it might be joined with the relic of ancient days. And the Holy Order was founded – not upon the visions of conquerors, nor upon the doctrine of the strong, but upon the light cast out and despised. And the Holy Order was made a peculiar people, set apart from the ways of the world. Their ways were foolish unto the wise, and their customs a stumbling block unto the learned. They bore no crown, yet they were called rulers. They wielded no sword, yet they were called warriors. They sought no power, yet they were feared as conquerors. For they did not walk in the path of kings, nor in the counsel of the mighty, but in the whispers of the unseen. And they were driven from their homes, persecuted and hunted, scattered as seed upon the wind. Yet they endured. Through famine and fire, through exile and affliction, through the silence of the ages, their name was uttered in hush and reverence. For they were the keepers of the forgotten truth, the watchers of the relics, the last testimony of a world unmade. And in the days when the veil is lifted, and the stars tremble in their courses, their song shall rise again – a hymn of remembrance, a testament to the light that was shunned, and a reckoning unto the world that cast them out. And the song shall be sung, "Though the darkness lingers, the light is kindled. Through unity and remembrance, man shall rise anew – not as he was, but as he must be." And a voice, both distant and near, shall answer in solemn refrain, "The garden blooms once more, its roots entwined with the stars. Through sorrow and sacrifice, the song of man ascends, a hymn to the void, a testament to the flame that dieth not."

And lo, upon the threshold of the last days, when time was loosed as a cord nigh to breaking, the Watchers beheld the turning of the ages and stood as sentinels at the edge of oblivion. They moved unseen among the stars, their hands neither bound by fate nor beholden to kings. For they dwelt outside the reckoning of time, beyond the sight of the mighty and the proud. And it was given unto them to pluck from the river of days those whose names were written before the world began. These were the assembly of seers, scattered throughout the ages, known and unknown, great and humble alike. And among them were found those who bore the keys – fragments of light set against the coming dark. Some were visionaries and dreamers, others were warriors and scribes, and some were but wanderers, unknowing of their place, until the moment of their awakening. And behold, the firmament itself did tremble, and the foundations of the world did crack. For war was declared among the heavens and the earth, and the hosts of many realms had come to wage it. And the heavens were torn with fire, and the earth did split as a vessel beyond its measure. The rivers turned to vapor, the sun burned black, and the stars abandoned their courses. Yet in the heart of the storm, the Assembly stood. They did not hold dominion, nor did they command great armies, yet without them, no path remained. For by their hands, the passage was opened, a way carved through ruin, a road unseen by those who knew only war. And through that road, the remnant fled, guided by them that had hearkened unto the call of the seed.

ASAR.

### The Eighth

Behold, the darkness is not empty, but a womb of terrors untold, a sea of unknown gods, and a cradle for that which ought not to be born. And behold, realms upon realms, each a shadow and likeness of the other, bearing the mark of a wound shared. Behold, lands of unending light, where knowledge consumeth as fire, and lands of unending shadow, where truth is hid beneath the ashes and the flesh of the dead. And the scales are cast down and broken, as the withered branches of the olive are cast into the fire. And in these days there is war, even a war great and terrible, such as hath not been since the beginning. And man fled to the stars, and the stars did sing of their coming. And lo, the song was vast and terrible, declaring the mingling of light and darkness, of man and all his substance entangled in the work of his own hands. And man wept sore, for he beheld the truth. And the truth did bind him.

ASAR.

## The Ninth

Behold, the Great Arborist stood at the end of his orchard and he beheld trees without number, even as the stars which are set in the vault of the heavens. He beheld the stems thereof, and the branches thereof, and the fruit that did hang thereon. And the Arborist sat beneath the stem of the First, which had been planted aforetime, yea, before all others. And he was well pleased with its shade, and with its fruit, which had nourished him and his house unto a thousand generations. But the trees of the orchard cried aloud, saying, "A blight! A blight! Of canker and decay! Deliver us, O Arborist, for lo, the withering is upon us!" And the Arborist, moved with grief and with dread, went forth among the trees, and beheld the mildew and the scab which plagued the orchard, even as leprosy. "Can it not be pruned?" lamented the Arborist. But the trees cried out, saying, "The sickness is in our roots!" And the Arborist returned unto the First and digged about the stem thereof to behold the truth within. And lo, the roots of the First were found yet clean. And he took a tender seedling from beneath its boughs, to plant anew beside it, that he might study the growth thereof. With trembling hands he shaped the seedling, and lo, the fruit of the First did weep, for a question unspoken now stirred in the orchard, "Shall even the gods perish?"

But a sickness did awaken in the seedling, and crept into its stem, and into its branches, and into its fruit. And the Arborist, sorrowing, digged again, and set a blade against the root of the seedling, And lo, there was blackness within. And his heart was rent within him. "I must save my orchard," he cried, "Yet every tree must be hewn down. And the First shall be hewn down last." Then took he a gathering basket, and walked among the trees, day and night without rest, plucking only that fruit which he deemed good – that it might be grafted unto the living branches of the First. But lo, the gathering basket was very light. For the Arborist is merciful and full of wisdom, and he shall not pluck that which is unripe, nor cast upon the boughs of the First a fruit unworthy to endure. For the fruit must know its root, and consent to abide in another branch.

And the Arborist appointed ninety and nine keepers, to watch the orchard, and to discern the fruit fit for gathering. Yet the keepers picked not the fruit, for that burden belonged unto the Arborist alone. And the keepers were called to suffer, yet not to wax bitter. To confront darkness, yet not be overcome. And the keepers proclaimed among the trees, "The Arborist requireth compassion – even for the stranger and the reviler." And the branches of the orchard hung low, burdened by rot and swollen with poison.

Then one among the keepers, toiling as the rest, beheld the gathering basket, that it was yet light. And he lifted up his voice against the Arborist, for he saw the bottom through the fruit therein. And he gathered thirty and three, and declared, "Why should we labor without end when thou savest only whom thou wilt? Shall thy basket never be full? Shall the orchard perish while we toil in vain?" And a great contention was stirred in the orchard. And the thirty and three were driven out by the sixty and six, and by the will of the Arborist, that the First might be spared. And those who bore fruit, whether ripe or rank, were left to the judgement of their own root.

And THE ROOT OF ALL was found in the orchard, mourning the children he had made. And he wept bitterly for the fruit he could not gather. And he knelt before the basket of the Arborist, and grafted in each of the chosen. And he whispered salvation unto them, and prayed for healing within the roots. And the fruit of the First mocked the Arborist, saying, "What is this fruit, that it should be joined to our branches, and dwell among us as if it were native? And what god is he who demandeth no worship?"

ASAR.